DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 271 889 EA 018 680

AUTHOR deJung, John E.; Duckworth, Kenneth
TITLE Measuring Student Absences in the High Schools.
INSTITUTION Oregon Univ., Eugene. Center for Educational Policy and Management.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Apr 86
NOTE 60p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (67th, San Francisco, CA, April 16-20, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attendance; High Schools; *High School Students; Measurement Techniques; Predictor Variables; Recordkeeping; Research Problems; School Holding Power; Secondary Education; Student Attitudes; Student Motivation; Students; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Behavior; *Truancy

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a general overview of a major study of student absenteeism as well as a narrower look at the problems associated with measuring student absences. The study data came from questionnaires completed by students, teachers, and administrators at six high schools in two urban districts in the western United States; interviews with teachers and administrators; and district records. After describing the sample, the paper reviews problems of underreporting absences, difficulties in assessing the significance of absence figures, and problems in defining "absence." A measure of absence based on class periods rather than on full or half days is proposed. The paper next discloses the magnitude of the absence problem. Students' reasons for attending or not attending classes are examined, and the effects of class subject, size, difficulty, teacher, and grading system on absence rates are reviewed. Differences between frequently and infrequently absent students are noted. The differences between teachers with high student absence rates and those with low rates are explored in terms of classroom practices, attendance monitoring procedures, and beliefs concerning absence control. The paper concludes with eight specific recommendations to schools for increasing control over absences. An appendix lists the individual reports based on the study. (PGD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED271889

Paper Presented at AERA Annual Meeting
San Francisco, April 1986

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

MEASURING STUDENT ABSENCES IN THE HIGH SCHOOLS

by
John E. deJung
Kenneth Duckworth

Center for Educational Policy and Management
College of Education
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon 97403

EA 018 680

The preparation of this project report was made possible through an Institutional Grant awarded by the National Institute of Education to the Center for Educational Policy and Management. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the NIE or the U.S. Department of Education.

MEASURING STUDENT ABSENCES IN THE HIGH SCHOOLS

Section I Problem and Project Overview 1

Section II Measurement of Student Absences

A. School Sample and Data Collection 7

B. Problems in Measuring Absences 9

C. Measuring Absences by Class Period 14

Section III Report on Student Absence

A. How Much Absence? 23

B. Absences in Which Classes? 25

C. High-Absence vs. Low-Absence Students 35

D. Absences and Grades 38

Section IV Report on Teacher Differences 39

Section V Recommendations To Schools 47

References 54

Appendix A--Project Reports 56

MEASURING STUDENT ABSENCES IN THE HIGH SCHOOLS

John E. deJung and Kenneth Duckworth

Paper presented at AERA

San Francisco, April, 1986

Section I: PROBLEM AND PROJECT OVERVIEW

Student absenteeism continues to be one of the most serious and intractable problems for the secondary school. While acknowledging that accurate figures are difficult to obtain, Birman and Natriello (1978) found that high school absenteeism is clearly on the rise, though this increase appears less evident in some areas of the country than others. In the National Association of Secondary School Principals' (NASSP) annual polls of principals in the mid-1970s, poor attendance was rated as the "most perplexing student problem" and was mentioned twice as often as any other difficulty with students (NASSP 1975). Duke (1978) also reported that absenteeism is seen by high school administrators as their major discipline problem (1). Dramatic reports of the nonattendance of large numbers of students in all parts of the nation continue to recur in the

---

1 Quite possibly student absence is more easily controlled in the middle schools. A prior study by the authors found student disciplinary reports for truancy or class cutting relatively infrequent in middle schools compared to reports for disruptive class behavior, interference with other students, disrespect for teachers, and lateness to class (deJung and Duckworth, 1984).

popular and professional press (Fiske 1983, Foster 1983). Though the current nationwide concerns with drop-out rates and their projected increase as schools tighten their academic demands (Howe 1984; Alexander and Pallas 1984, Natriello and Dornbusch 1984; McDill, Natriello, and Pallas 1985) have reduced discussion of absenteeism, per se, its preeminence as a precursor to the ultimate school absence, that of leaving school, is steadily becoming recognized (Barr 1985, Schellenberg 1985).

Concern with student absences, however, is justified on a much broader basis than its relationship to early school leaving. Rising absenteeism is seen as leading to "chronic institutional anemia." Considerable managerial time is required just to respond daily to nonattendance; and this leaves teachers, counselors, and administrators with less opportunity for more instructionally focused activities. In the classroom, teachers are burdened when they have to review and provide makeup work for absent students, which, in turn, leads to neglecting of students who attend regularly. But ultimately it is the frequently absent student who is the especially heavy loser, as a former New Jersey Commissioner of Education has commented:

> Frequent absences of pupils from regular classroom learning experiences disrupt the continuity of the instructional process. The benefit of regular classroom instruction is lost and cannot be entirely regained, even by extra after-school instruction. Consequently, many pupils who miss school frequently experience great difficulty in achieving the maximum benefits of schooling. Indeed, many pupils in these circumstances are able

> to achieve only mediocre success in their academic program. (Wheatley et al. 1971)

Nationwide, the average percentage of high school students reported absent in recent school years is about 9 or 10 percent, approximately three times the number estimated as attributable to illness or injury. In many of our larger metropolitan areas this figure is at least doubled (Fiske 1983, Foster 1983, Kaplan and Luck 1977). If the annual drop-out rate of about 10 percent of the total high school population were also added in, the overall absence rate would be even higher. Worse, since absences are probably "underreported" because of student deviousness, careless reporting practices by teachers, varying definitions of absence, and administrative concern for "appearances" and school reimbursements Meyer et al. 1971), the real percentage of absences may actually be higher still.

Not only are these absence rates disturbingly high, but the causes of absenteeism are immensely complex as well. High absentee rates can be seen as a response to inadequate or inappropriate curricula, although schools with flexible and innovative programs may also experience high rates. High rates may also result from personal and social factors, such as student relationships with particular school administrators and teachers, family attitudes, peer pressures, social values, economic circumstances, age, and health. On a day-to-day, immediate-decision level,

competing attractions and the students' susceptibility to persuasion and rebellion enter in. Erosion of parental control, material affluence, new life styles, and weakened court enforcement are further contributors. Different persons "play truant" at different times for different reasons. Some persons are regularly truant; most are only occasionally truant.

Given this complexity and their limited control and resources, schools often end up shepherding "strays" rather than corralling the whole flock while herding out the more persistent "strays."

During the last few decades, American schools have experimented with numerous administrative policies regarding student absenteeism. One continuing trend, for example, is to require class attendance as a condition for grades, course credit, or continued enrollment. However, we believe that decisions to use such policies should be based on a complete examination of student attendance, using a data base that covers several school terms and that includes perspectives from teachers and students as well as from administrators. We incorporated these requisites into an NIE-funded study initiated by the University of Oregon Center for Educational Policy and Management (CEPM) in December 1983. The study generated an enormous data base nearly 1,500,000 student absences in some 10,000 classes during a 2-year period.

We believe that our findings derived from this data base constitute one of the most complete analyses to date of the complexities of absenteeism. We have been looking at absentee rates, at differing definitions of absenteeism, and at procedures for keeping track of absences. We have investigated variations in absences by student, by teacher, and by subject; the relationship between absences and grades; and effects of time of day and class size on absences. We have also studied the differences between teachers whose students are absent less frequently and those whose students are absent more frequently in terms of these teachers' classroom practices, attendance monitoring actions and discipline beliefs. Finlly, we have looked at differences in absences at the school level in terms of possible policy effects.

We are currently completing a series of detailed reports, each dealing with a particular segment of our data. These individual reports were prepared in order to describe the project data and to present the results of our various analyses within a manageable number of pages. The present paper includes both a special focus--on the problem of measurement of student absences--and a brief and general report of the overall project findings. The interested reader can find data support for the general findings in the project reports listed in Appendix A.

We begin the present paper with a brief description of our school sample and data collection procedures. We then

describe some of the problems in measuring attendance and describe a class absence measure that we developed. A summary of the project data that supports our use of this measure is included.

A subsequent section presents a series of encapsulated reports of project findings related to the questions: How Much Absence? and Absences in which Classes?. We examine the latter question in terms of department differences, period and size of class, and differences between "easy" and "hard" classes, both in terms of curricula and grading practices. We also look for differences between frequently absent and infrequently absent students and the relationship of class absences to grades and to course failure.

We follow these "student-centered" reports with a summary of our findings on differences between teachers with low student absence rates and those with high student absence rates. Our teacher data include reports of teachers'classroom practices, their attendance monitoring procedures, and their beliefs regarding control of absences. We conclude with some general recommendations that have grown out of these findings. Though our data were collected from six schools in two school districts,we do not in this report contrast either schools or the districts. (A comparison and contrast of the schools and districts is given in Duckworth and de Jung 1986a.)

Section II. MEASUREMENT OF STUDENT ABSENCES

A. School Sample and Data Collection

Our sample consisted of three high schools from each of two urban school districts in the western United States. District I, which provided Schools A, B, and C, was a larger city school district enrolling approximately 15,000 students in 10 high schools. Though schools A, B, and C were selected partly because they served low-income student populations, none were the embattled schools described in popular reports of inner-city schools with high proportions of ethnic minorities and devastating absenteeism. At most, one school had a 25 percent minority population most of whom were Asian-American students. The population of black students in these schools was less than 10 percent. The published student absence rates for the schools in past years ranged between 7 and 11 percent.

District II, which provided schools D, E, and F, was a smaller school district with an enrollment of approximately 5,000 students in 4 high schools. Aside from district size, District II differed from District I in that it contained even fewer ethnic minorities. Also, District I maintained a two-semester, four-term school year whereas District II was on a trimester system with three terms of twelve weeks each. All six schools were four-year comprehensive high schools enrolling from 1,000 to 1,600 students per building and having approximately 60 to 70 full-time teaching staff. There was, however, noticeably different emphasis within the

school curriculum. The schools also varied in the extent to which they had flexible scheduling and an "open" campus and in the number of classes per day. Though there were, of course, similarities in the six schools' attendance rules, each was unique in its particular attendance policies and enforcements (2).

The project data collection involved (a) extended, semistructured interviews and subsequent questionnaires completed by most key building administrators particularly involved with attendance and with school counselors; (b) various district records of student absences and student end-of-term reports containing courses, grades, and class absences; (c) a questionnaire administered to all classroom teachers and followup interviews with a subsample of these teachers; and (d) a questionnaire administered to all students.

The student absence and grade records were collected the end of each term beginning in the winter term 1983 and ending in June 1985. Our most intensive analyses were made from the spring 1984 data, and these findings shall be most frequently mentioned in this paper. The teacher and student questionnaires were administered early in the spring 1984 term and again, with some added questions, in the following year. Both administrations are referred to in this paper. A total of some 10,000 students and nearly 500 teachers

---

2 The school differences in managing attendance are described in Duckworth and deJung (1986a), described in Appendix A.

completed one or both of their questionnaires. We visited all schools during both school years to observe each school's attendance-recording procedures. We reinterviewed those administrators principally responsible for school attendance during the second year to learn of changes in attendance policies or enforcements.

B. Problems in Measuring Absence

In none of the schools in our study were school attendance records nearly as accurate as they should have been. Among the several major reasons for this were: inconsistent procedures for recording absences in the classroom, errors made in entering teachers' absence reports into office records, varying definitions and guidelines for what constitute full-day and half-day absences, and reliance on these latter two measures (full-day and half-day) in place of class absences. As a result, many student absences never became part of a school's attendance record. The true absence rates may well have been much higher than official school or district records indicated; thus, absenteeism may be an even more serious problem than we thought.

Essentially all attendance data is based on a yes-no decision; the student is either present or not. A first problem in compiling attendance data is that attendance takers are allowed to exercise discretion. Even within the narrower confines of a single school building or department, procedures are not uniformly or faithfully followed.

Classroom teachers, for example, do not all take attendance at the same time. Nor do they agree as to what to do with the tardy student, though there may be a school or department rule. This problem raises such questions as: After how many minutes of lateness is the student declared absent? Is an exception to be made for an excused lateness?

Attendance-taking procedures vary from teacher to teacher; generally the methods are left for the teacher to choose. Some call out all names; others scan their room for empty seats; some delegate attendance taking to a responsible student, still others may excuse a student from class for a prearranged absence and not record it. Clearly such variety may affect attendance counts, as may a teacher's diligence in recording attendance, a task that some find more important than do others. Still, almost all the teachers responding to our questionnaire either year said that they considered attendance important and were "concerned to be as accurate as possible in taking attendance."

Attendance records are also affected by frequent errors made when class absence reports are entered into school office records, often by unskilled student workers. Apparently, errors of omission, sometimes deliberate, are common. Student clerks at one school we studied simply stopped entering class lists into the attendance office's computer when their work hour was up--whether or not all class absences had been recorded. From conversations with

student clerks and others, we learned that student office helpers are often pressured to omit certain names from the daily absence reports. Thus, it is not surprising that teachers' records indicated 3 to 5 percent more class absences per day than did office records in schools where we were able to compare central office records and teacher classbooks.

An even more intractable error in reporting attendance is caused by the recording procedure itself. Probably because it is much quicker, attendance data is almost invariably recorded as persons or days absent. Anyone not reported absent for the day is assumed to be present. A mistaken in reporting a student as absent when he or she is present is usually detected and corrected, especially if such an error leads to discipline. However, not recording a student's absence is an easier mistake to make, is probably more common, and is certainly less likely to be appealed. Such "errors of omission" work in everyone's favor: the school's attendance record looks better and no one is punished. In addition, no attendance is taken on "perfect attendance" days, such as examination or registration days; by default, all are present. Likewise, graduating seniors are rarely counted absent during their last few days of school.

Though the foregoing errors are cumulative in favoring underreporting of student absences, the inaccuracies from these sources are still relatively minor compared to the

gross underreporting created by the traditional daily report of attendance in terms of the numbers of students in full- or half-day attendance. This number, usually converted either into a proportion of students enrolled or into a proportion of student membership, is easily translated into annual figures by summing daily attendance figures and dividing by the number of school days in the year. The annual attendance percentage has become the customary way of describing school attendance in both the professional and popular press. It has a fairly direct meaning. For example, an 88 percent attendance figure means that on the average day,12 percent of the students are absent. It could also be stated that the average student is absent one day in eight (12 percent),though this average tends to be misleading (3)

The loss due to reporting attendance on the basis of full- or half-day units is that student absences that don't qualify as full- or half-day absences are simply not counted in the school attendance record. The example of an 88 percent school attendance excludes shorter or scattered student absences. Whereas, this reporting may be still

---

3 Only occasionally, as in Fiske (1983)) does the reporting go beyond such averages and reveal the more disturbing percentages related to the "chronically" absent student. In that study the average attendance for 78 of New York City's comprehensive high schools was 80 percent, but more than a third of the students were defined as chronically absent, "missing 15 or more days" during a 90-day term. Over a fourth of these, or 10 percent of the total student population, were, in effect, drop-outs who missed more than 50 days per semester.

relevant in the elementary grades where students remain in one class for most of the school day, it is grossly imprecise in the larger, departmentalized high school. It simply leaves out counts of class cutting which cumulatively can create a greater number of absences.

This underreporting is further confounded by a problem of interpretation; state- and district-level and district guidelines and definitions notwithstanding, our sample schools were found to vary widely as to what they constituted as full- or half-day attendance. A peculiarity likely not limited to the two school districts in our study was their emphasis on form over content; they specified how their schools would report attendance but evidently tolerated variation at building level as to how it was to be measured.

The result was that each school's "working" definition of full- and half-day absence varied according to administrative (or clerical) choice, was apparently at variance with state definitions (4) and was unrelated to the number of courses students took. Although some schools had seven- or eight-period days, the majority of students in all six schools were enrolled for six periods. Four of the six schools defined a full-day absence as four or more periods

---

4 The Oregon State Department of Education, for example, defines a student as present or "in attendance" if "present for one hour more than half his or her school day." Since school periods are less than one hour long, the student with five or six classes cannot be considered in attendance on any day with more than one class absence. All our six schools were using much less stringent definitions.

missed, but they split on whether two or three period absences constituted a half-day absence. Sometimes this depended on when a student had lunch. The fifth school, where 91 percent of the students had six classes or less, recorded a half-day absence if three morming or three afternoon periods were missed and a full-day absence if five classes were missed. Not surprisingly, that school had the lowest average rate of reported full-day and half-day absences. The sixth school defined a full-day absence as six periods missed in the eight-period schedule and a half-day absence as two periods missed in either the morning or afternoon. Attendance clerks at all the schools said they took into account each student's class load when recording full and half day absences. However, since this would require having personal knowledge of all students' schedules and making exceptions to school rules, they also admitted that they were not always able to keep track.

C. Measuring Absences by Class Period

Many of the problems just described could be avoided by measuring absences by class-period rather than by a full day or half day. We developed such a measure of student absence from the total number of the absences reported on each student's end-of-term report card. These entries were based on teachers' class records, which, in turn, were the schools' official statement on student absences. The sum of these absences was the number of periods for which each

student was recorded absent. Dividing this sum by the number of classes the student took yielded a student's average number of class absences. Dividing this average number of class absences by the number of class days (or days on which attendance was taken) yielded the student's rate of absence for that term. Thus, if a student had six classes during a 60-day term and a total of 48 absences in those six classes, that student's average class absence was eight periods, or an attendance rate of 86.7 percent. A student with that attendance rate could have had eight full day absences, but it is more likely that there were only a few full-day absences, along with several classes missed four or five times and one or two classes missed twice as often. If so, school office records might list that student's absences as low as two days, or 96.7 percent attendance, when only full-day plus half-day recorded absences are counted.

The individual students' average class absence rates can, of course, be summed to yield school absence (or attendance) measures. The differences in measures based on class absence data and those based on full- and half-day absences are presented in Table 1. The data are all based on the final (spring) term in the 1983-1984 school year. The entries appearing near the top in the upper portion of Table 1 are the percentages of students in each school enrolled for six classes, less than six classes, or more than six classes.

TABLE 1

FULL DAY, HALF DAY AND NUMBER AND AVERAGE PERIOD ABSENCES
DURING FINAL 83-84 SPRING TERM IN SIX SCHOOLS

	DISTRICT I			
	SCHOOL A	SCHOOL B	SCHOOL C	ALL
No. of Students	957	1006	1259	3222
% Enrolled in Courses				
<6 classes	3	31	18	--
6 classes	79	63	70	--
>6 classes	18	6	12	--
School Averages				
Full Day Absences	5.3	4.1	4.0	4.4
Half Day Absences	11.6	10.2	11.3	11.0
No. Days with Absences	16.9	14.3	15.3	15.4
No. Periods Absent	43.4	33.4	37.3	37.9
No. Absences/Period	7.7	6.0	6.6	6.7
Rate of Absence[1]	17.2	13.2	14.6	15.0

	DISTRICT II			
	SCHOOL D	SCHOOL E	SCHOOL F	ALL
No. of Students	1209	1262	1578	4049
% Enrolled in Courses				
<6 classes	25	24	29	--
6 classes	69	47	62	--
>6 classes	6	29	9	--
School Averages				
Full Day Absences	2.6	2.7	3.0	2.8
Half Day Absences	1.4	2.6	.8	1.5
No. Periods Absent	34.2	29.5	32.4	32.1
No. Absence/Period	6.4	5.2	6.1	5.9
Rate of Absence[1]	11.3	9.2	10.7	10.0

[1] Absence rates are obtained by dividing number of absences per period by number of school days for that term, 45 for District I and 57 for District II

It should be noted that the averages for full- and half-day absences for the District I schools were generated from the end-of-term report card data, where a full-day absence was defined as 4 or more period absences and half-day absences as 1 to 3 period absences. The sum of these two measures is equal to the number of days for which a student had any recorded absences. As may be seen in the Table 1 data, in each of the District I schools, students, on the average, were absent from one or more of their classes nearly two days per school week. Comparable data for District II is not available since the full- and half-day figures here are derived from each school's daily report of absences, which is totally separate from end-of-term report card absences.

The comparisons most relevant to our preceding discussion of student absence measures are those between the full-day and the period- or class-based absences.

Table 1 shows that the period absence rates in all District I schools are half again as high as the number of days absent derived from the same (report card) data, an average for the three schools of 6.7 periods missed in each class compared to 4.4 full days. Comparing the number of days having <u>any</u> reported absence with those with full-day absences (four or more) reveals that, on the average, students had two to three times as many days with three or

less reported class period absences as they did with four or more such absences.

The District II data, which provides comparisons of the daily attendance reporting and end-of-term report card, show even larger differences than those for District I schools. Students in District II schools had an average class absence of 5.9 periods missed compared to only 2.8 full-day absences. This comparison is conservative since it equates all reported full-day absences as all periods missed instead of the schools's operating rules of 4 or 5. Adding in half-values for reported half-day absences still leaves nearly as many again unreported absences.

Further evidence of absences lost because of reporting procedures that use full- and half-day methods is apparent when the frequencies of occurrence of these absence measures are contrasted with those of class absences. Table 2 presents a summary of these distributions as cumulative percentages for the spring 1984 absence data for students in the six project schools.

The differences between the frequencies of absences per class (right section of Table 2) and the other full-day and half-day absence measures (left sections of Table 2) are especially striking for students with very low and very high numbers of absences. Nearly 30 percent of the

TABLE 2

FREQUENCIES AND CUMMULATIVE PERCENTAGES OF FULL DAY, HALF DAY, AND CLASS ABSENCE MEASURER FOR 5799[1] STUDENTS

Number of Absences	FULL DAYS Freq.	FULL DAYS Cum. %	HALF DAYS Freq.	HALF DAYS Cum. %	CLASS ABSENCE Freq.	CLASS ABSENCE Cum. %
0	1557	27	1665	29	31	.5
1	1126	46	874	44	675	12
2	823	60	532	53	746	25
3	575	70	407	60	770	39
4	456	78	327	66	640	50
5	318	83	225	70	574	60
6	199	87	217	73	465	68
7	181	90	174	76	315	75
8	131	93	141	79	278	79
9	103	94	140	81	219	83
10-15	228	98	530	90	675	95
16-20	68	99	261	95	201	98
>20	34	100	316	100	115	100
TOTAL	5799		5799		5755[2]	

[1]Total six school sample used for the questionnaire analysis

[2]Report card data was missing for 44 of these students

students had no (zero) recorded half-day absences, and over 25 percent had no recorded full-day absences. Yet only .5 percent were found to have no class absences, and only 12 percent had an average of one absence per class or less. Conversely, only 5 percent of the students were recorded absent more than ten full days, but 14 percent averaged more than ten absences per class. Evidently, many students who repeatedly were absent from their classes slip under their schools' full-day absence rule.

The relationships among the four absence measures in Table 1 were also examined in terms of product moment correlations coefficients computed for the District I and District II combined school samples. These inter correlations were as follows:

	District I (N = 3222)			District II (N = 3431)		
	FD	HD	AB	FD	HD	AB
Full-Day Absences (FD)	--	.26	.88	--	.39	.79
Half-Day Absences (HD)	.26	--	.65	.39	--	.57
Average Class Absences (AB)	.88	.65	--	.79	.57	--

The somewhat larger AB correlations for the District I students reflect the fact that all four absence measures in this district were derived from the same end-of-term absence reports. The differences between the two districts are not large, however (around .10). Evidently students with a greater number of reported full-day absences also had the

greater number of class absences, and vice-versa. This perhaps was somewhat evident in the Table 1 school averages. Approximately 60 percent of the variance of either measure is "explained" by the other. The relationship is considerably weaker for the half-day absence measure. In particular, the number of times a student is absent a smaller portion of the day is minimally predictive (approximately 10 percent variance in common) of the number of times he or she is absent the larger portion of the day.

We now return to the much higher full- day class absence correlations. The two measures, of course, have to be related, although it is likely that the size of the correlation would be different in different schools, depending on the particular rules and procedures for recording students' full day absences. It is possible that the extent of this relationship could be used as a measure of the "adequacy" of the particular full-day recording procedure a school uses, though we did not consider it in this study. The fact that considerable information is lost when using full-day recording procedures however, far outweighs any possible justification for its use.

Correlations between each of these absence measures with measures obtained for the same students the following

term were also computed for the second and third terms and third and fourth terms of 1984 for the District I sample. The correlations, based on an N of 3,222 students, were as follows:

	2nd-3rd Terms	3rd-4th Terms
Full-Day Absences	.48	.51
Half-Day Absences	.60	.67
Total-Day Absences	.63	.69
Average Class Absences	.72	.71

Apparently for all four measures, students tend generally to repeat their relative absence patterns from term to term. It perhaps should be noted that nearly all students had the same teacher for the greater part of their classes in subsequent terms since many of their classes were year-long sequences. These sequence courses likely contributed to the moderately high successive term correlations we obtained. The lower correlation for full-day absences as compared to half-day or class absences is possibly due to the irregularity of the occurrence of sick days or other legitimate absences from term to term. The broader interpretation from all our examinations of the class absence measure is that both rationally and statistically it appears superior as an index of student absence.

Section III. REPORT ON STUDENT ABSENCE

A. How Much Absence? Perhaps the most striking fact about student absences was their volume; in each of our six schools, from 300 to 400 students (a fourth to a third of the student enrollment) were reported absent every day for at least one class. Our six schools, with a total enrollment of some 7,000 students, reported over a 250,000 class absences in a single term lasting 9 to 12 weeks. The typical student averaged two to four class absences times each week. This totals to about 100 missed classes in a 36-week school year, or the equivalent of 18 full days of nonattendance. One student in seven was reported absent 20 percent or more of his or her class periods. Had we selected our six schools to represent low-attendance schools, these absence counts would have all been much higher.

Generally, class absences were found to increase slightly as the school year progressed from fall to winter to spring. The loss of 5 to 20 percent of students dropping out of school before the final term (5) probably minimized this increase since most drop-outs had higher absence rates. Class absences also varied with the time of day; attendance

---

5 Based on prior-year district figures.

6 This nondistinction between excused (legitimate) and unexcused is consistent throughout this report. In practice, the distinction is poorly maintained; it is dependent on school surveillance on the one hand and student deviousness on the other. We favor school policies that would make this deviousness unrewarding.

was poorest immediately following lunch and in the first period of the day. These time-of-day differences were not dramatically large, however; the higher absence periods averaged about one more absence per period than the lower absence periods. Moreover, absences were not higher in the last period of the day, as expected. That these data were based on absences during the final term of the school year, a season when warm, sunny afternoons might induce more absences, further strengthens the conclusion that final periods, at least in our six schools, are in less jeopardly from class cutting than we had supposed. Or, viewed in another way, all periods are in jeopardy.

Even more striking were the variations in class-period absences, a statistic usually overlooked in reports of total group averages. During the Spring 1984 term, for example, the average student in our study missed 35 class periods. Nearly 600 students (9 percent) averaged less than one absence <u>per course</u>, but over 1,000 students (18 percent) averaged nine or more absences <u>per course</u>. Three hundred of those 1,000 students had more than 15 absences per course per term.

The data used to compare absences at different times of day referred to earlier provided further description of student variations. Within every class period, approximately 12 percent of the students had perfect attendance, but nearly as many were absent about a third of the time. Many individual classes had an even greater

variation with a fourth to a third of the students having no more than one absence over a nine-week term and an equal number having over ten absences. This variability in class-period absences was further examined for a random sample of 8 percent of the students. Nearly all of these students were absent two or three times more often from their most frequently missed class than they were from their least frequently missed class. On the average, they had eight less absences in their least absent class than in their most absent class.

B. Absences in Which Classes?

To the extent that students choose the classes they want to take in the first place, they exercise an attendance option; presumably, they try to avoid enrolling in classes that are not attractive to them. We might anticipate, then, that schools allowing or encouraging more of their students to select their own courses each term would subsequently have fewer class absences. However, this was not evident for the schools in our study. What was evident perhaps relates more to our earlier consideration of whether absences might be related to the time of day a class met. We found some minor differences in time-of-day absences for the student body as a whole but did not find the increased absences we expected to find in the last periods of the school day. Instead we found that student enrollment was from 15 to 30 percent lower in last-period classes in all

our schools. Given the option, many students apparently enroll in classes scheduled for earlier in the day. Seniors, who typically had reduced course loads, especially exercised this option. We may also expect this to be more true for students, at all grade levels, who are less committed to school; however, we have not yet explored this relationship.

We made a number of more direct enquiries regarding which classes students were absent from. First, we asked the students directly on an add-on part of our student questionnaire which classes they cut most often and why. We also asked which classes they didn't cut and why. We also asked their reasons for skipping whole days. Reasons given for skipping whole days of school were quite varied. A fifth of the 1,200 students we sampled simply said they had "other things to do." Illness, "personal problems," "homework," and "bored" each accounted for about 10 percent of responses, while "party/drugs" or "hating school" were each mentioned by 1 in 20 students. A separate, district-initiated study of chronic truants suggests that these latter reasons are much more prominent among students with very high absence rates.

The courses students said they cut most often were social science, English, and mathematics, followed closely by business. Each of these content areas was named, in nearly the same order, on 20 to 25 percent of the 1,200 returns from all six high schools we sampled. Foreign language vied with the front runners in the schools with

more college-bound students. The main reason students gave for cutting a class was simply that it was "boring," a response that appeared on a third of the returns in every school. "Dislike of teacher" and "too easy" tied for second mention, each appearing on about 12 percent of the returns. Other reasons, such as "homework not done," "hate subject," and "too difficult," were mentioned by only small percentages of students.

Surprisingly, the classes in the same three content areas students most frequently cut--social science, English, and mathematics--were also most frequently named as classes students wouldn't cut, except that English, selected by approximately a third of the students in each school, moved to first place. Of course, students who listed these courses as ones they would never cut were not the same students who listed the courses as ones they cut most often and it is quite possible that they were referring to different levels of the class or to a particular curriculum or teacher.

The two principal reasons students gave for not cutting a class were that they "would miss too much" and that the class was "interesting." These two reasons each appeared on nearly 40 percent of the returns. "Good teacher" was mentioned on 7 percent of the returns, and "learn a lot" was mentioned on 2 percent. Generally, the traditional academic subjects, which are usually required courses, were mentioned more often than others perhaps because more students were

enrolled in them. To some extent, physical education and science classes were also required, but both received fewer nominations.

Another interesting finding from the questionnaire data was that more juniors and seniors chose "too much (class) work to make up" as a reason for not cutting, while more freshmen and sophomores chose "parents or guardians would find out." No more than around 5 percent of the students at any grade level chose either of the other questionnaire alternatives: "teacher would find out" and "detention." These low percentages and the infrequent mention of "penalties" in the student's open-ended responses (corroborated by data from teacher questionnaires reported below) strongly suggest that penalties are a minor deterrent to class cutting, at least for the total student population. For some subgroups of students, perhaps deterrents do work, but we have yet to document this. On the other hand, we certainly do not propose doing away with penalties for absences (as did a third of the students in the survey), and we know of no data to support such a position.

Following our examination of student self-reporting of their class cutting we examined data on student absences obtained from end-of-term absence reports kept by teachers. We should note that these class absence data include both

legitimate student absences (i.e.,for sickness and family distress) as well as unexcused class absences, whether detected or not (6).

Another area we analyzed was the differences in absences among the various departments within a school. We were able to identify eleven (7) major departments in each of our schools. These were business education, English, fine arts, foreign languages, health education, home economics, industrial arts, mathematics, physical education, science, and social science. For each school, we computed average student absences for each department by averaging absences in all classes taught in that department. We repeated these computations for each term of data.

Our findings were that a group of three departments, industrial arts, home economics, and health education, repeatedly had higher student absences and that three other departments, find arts, foreign language, and science, repeatedly had lower student absences. The remaining departments were all bunched together. These findings were

---

6 This nondistinction between excused (legitimate) and unexcused is consistent throughout this report. In practice, the distinction is poorly maintained; it is dependent on school surveilliance on the one hand and student deviousness on the other. We favor school policies that would make this deviousness unrewarding.

7 Our general attendance analysis had already excluded classes of less than 10 students and other special classes, such as English as a second language, which served unique student groups. For our department analysis we categorized computer science to either mathematics or business education, depending on the teacher's other assignments.

surprisingly constant from term to term and included few exceptions from school to school. The difference in average student absences between the three low-absence departments and the three high-absence departments was typically a third more absences reported in the high-absence departments. Apparently, whether due to student self-selection into particular departments, or to the policies of the various departments, or to student interest in the subject or attendance demands made by the subject itself, some departments have predictively more or less of an absence problem.

We extended our analysis of department differences to examine the variation in absences in classes taught by the various teachers within the same department. Our results revealed considerable intradepartment variation, nearly all departments having some teachers with much better student attendance than other teachers in the same department. Though our first analyses established that some departments had consistently higher or lower student attendance, the more striking finding was the considerable within-department variation. No department had a corner on teachers with the best (or the worst) records of student attendance. Nor did all of a department's teachers have either uniformly high student attendance rates or uniformly low attendance rates. Teacher differences were perhaps moderated but not determined by what they taught.

We then explored whether classes serving students of different ability levels might account for differences in their absence rates. Though none of the six schools in the study practiced a strict track system of regimenting enrollments in a program of courses on the basis of aptitude or career goals, within some departments there were clearly both slower and faster or higher level courses, and students were encouraged not to enroll in classes that would be either too difficult or too easy for them. The result was a portion of classes in all schools (principally within the more traditional academic departments) identifiable as enrolling mostly high-ability or mostly low-ability students. The most extreme examples of this were the Advanced Placement classes, which enrolled small numbers of juniors and seniors attempting to earn college credit by taking advanced high school courses.

Our analysis involved controls by department and by teacher. We limited our comparisons to classes taught within the same department and by the same teacher. Within this framework we compared absences in classes having curricula designed for lower-ability students with those having curricula designed for "mixed-ability" students, and with those "harder" classes having curricula designed for higher-ability students. The first comparison group comprised 27 teachers who taught a total of 126 classes, 50 of which enrolled predominately lower-ability students and 76 of which enrolled mixed-ability students. The second

comparison group comprised 32 teachers who taught a total of 148 classes sixty-one of these classes enrolled predominately higher-ability students, and 87 enrolled students of mixed ability.

In our analyses we compared the absences of students in the different ability-level classes taught by a teacher. The results of these comparisons clearly indicated fewer absences in "harder" classes and more absences in lower ability levels for students with classes. Neither class size nor teacher was a factor since all comparisons were made between classes taught by the same teacher. Again, however, individual teacher variation was clearly present. Some teachers apparently were able to maintain low student absence rates (or were obliged to settle for high absence rates) independent of their class's designation as "hard," "slow," or "average." These exceptions aside, the analysis confirms that given the same teacher and subject area, absences are likely to be lowest in classes designed for higher-ability students and highest in classes designed for lower-ability students.

We also looked to see if students were absent more in larger or smaller classes or in classes with tougher grading practices (fewer high grades received by students). Our first set of analyses involved over 500 classes in two District II schools. This sample provided class sizes ranging from 10 to 42 students and average class grades of from 3.85 (nearly all As) to a low of .95 (more Fs than Ds).

Correlations computed between class size and student absences were all found to be near zero at all periods of the day in both schools. Clearly, students were absent no more in larger than in smaller classes.

This class size analysis was then extended to all six schools using all teachers in each school and correlating the total number of students taught by a teacher with the average absences of those students in that teacher's classes. The total number of students taught by a teacher ranged from just below 50 to nearly 150. Again, no relationship with student absences was found. All six school correlations were close to zero. Our finding is that absences are not greater in larger classes, nor are they higher for teachers who are teaching larger numbers of students in all their classes combined.

Our examination of absences in classes where different grading practices were used proceded similarly to that for class size but with different results. All correlations for the different periods of day in both schools were negative and significantly different from zero at the .05 level of confidence. They ranged between -.35 and -.64, with a median of -.57. Similarly, the six school correlations involving the average grade teachers gave all their students (averaged for the four to six classes most teachers had) and the average absence for students in all these classes were all negative and significantly different from zero. They ranged from -.38 to -.54, with a median of -.50.

Though these findings clearly indicate that higher grades are given in classes that have fewer absences, the direction of causality is not apparent from the analyses. It could as easily be said that teachers who give higher grades have lower average absence rates, suggesting that students will more regularly attend classes in which they (as a group) will be likely to earn higher grades or that they will be absent more frequently from classes in which the reward (grades or credits) is smaller. We suspect this latter interpretation is less credible, at least for our more frequently absent students, who would have needed to begin their absences early in the school term. Our view is that lower grades more often are given to students "because" of their class absences than students are absenting themselves from classes in which they are failing. Data provided by teacher self-description surveys tend to support this position. Both the near unanimity of teachers who agreed that "no student who is frequently absent should receive an A grade" and the prevalent practice among teachers of lowering grades of their repeatedly absent students, suggest that lower grades follow rather than precede student absences. This view of the teacher responding to their students' attendance/non attendance behaviors is also suggested by the finding that students who begin the term with frequent absences but reduce their further absences after midterm rarely receive a failing grade at the end of the term. One corollary here is that

students who can amend their poor attendance pattern won't receive F grades. However, inspection of end-of-term lists of failing students also revealed large numbers of failed students with only moderate absence rates. Operationally, the reward (a passing grade for improved attendance) can hardly apply to a student who had reasonably good attendance to start with.

C. High-Absence vs. Low-Absence Students

We were especially interested in the students with the poorest attendance records. Accordingly, within each school and grade level we ranked students by their average class absences in order to compare the "best" and the "worst" student attendance records for each school. Upperclassmen would have been seriously underrepresented if grade level were not taken into account, since fewer seniors were found in either of the extreme groups. Another grade level difference was that more upperclassmen (37 percent) than underclassmen (25 percent) agreed with a statement that read "I'm not bothered if I skip school some days." Fifty-six percent of seniors indicated that they were not bothered by cutting classes, compared to 42 percent of freshmen. Over half of all students felt their school's attendance rules were not strictly enforced. At all grade levels, about one of every four students reported cutting class at least once a week.

Those with absences in the top fifth of the 5,800 students in the sample missed an average of 12 periods in

each of their classes, the middle fifth, missed four periods, and the lower fifth, which missed one period. In each of the six high schools about as many girls as boys were in the high-absence groups. In the larger of the two school districts, where there were more minority students, the low-absence group contained disproportionately more students with Asian backgrounds and fewer black students.

In general, the student questionnaire responses revealed more similarities than differences among the three groups. For example, we were surprised that nearly all students in all groups expected to graduate from high school. In addition, 82 percent of the high-absence students and just above 90 percent of the other two groups (8) reported that their high school learning had "a lot to do with what they would be able to do afterwards in life." Similar high proportions of students also said that they would <u>not</u> quit school if given the option.

Apparently, only a small portion of those students who are continually absent consciously intend to leave school altogether. Their continued absenteeism will almost certainly lead to failing grades in some courses or even to dropping out of school altogether, but this fact seems to be more a consequence than a choice. An independent study

---

8 These percentages refer to our first year data, which are examined in greater detail in Duckworth and deJung (1986b). Second year data were generally similar. A fuller report of our second year's student questionnaire responses is in preparation, deJung and Duckworth (1986b), also listed in Appendix A.

tracing a District II cohort sample through junior high and high school revealed that poor school attendance in junior high school was the best predictor of dropping out (Schellenberg, 1985). Another predictor is failing high school work. Most students who drop out appear to have a series of truancies and failing courses on record for their last term in school. The extent to which these students have been offered alternatives to continued school failures is not known.

Major differences between the high- and low-absence groups existed in relation to their feelings about skipping school or cutting classes. Nearly half of those in the high-absence group said that they did not feel unduly concerned about skipping "some days of school," compared to only 19 percent of the low-absence group, and 62 percent of students in the high-absence group, expressed no concern about cutting classes, compared to 32 percent of the low-absence group. Although the educational level of students' parents was nearly the same for both the low- and high-absence groups, fewer students in the high-absence group took college prep courses or planned to go to a four-year college. There were further differences in expectations about grades: 20 percent fewer high-absence students found it easy to earn passing grades, and a large majority (85 percent) said that they would be satisfied with a C or D grade (compared to half of the students with fewer absences).

D. Absences and Grades

One very clear discriminator between high-absence and low-absence students was the grade point average (GPA), which usually decreased as students' absences increased. Nearly half of all high-absence students had GPAs of 1.5 or lower, accounting for 84 percent of all GPAs below 1.5 in the six schools. This relationship was even more dramatic for students in the low-absence group: only 2 percent of low-absence students had GPAs as low as 1.5, whereas 70 percent had B averages (3.0) or better.

The relationship between attendance and grades was further revealed when we analyzed students' absences from the courses they were failing. We found that their average absences in failed courses were more than double the school average; moreover, students who were failing more than one course were absent from those classes over three times the school average. This substantial increase suggests a cascading effect on class absences, which implies that students enrolled in more than one class in which they are doing decide more quickly to give up coming to the classes they are failing. These findings are based on several thousand failed courses, with approximately one fourth of all students receiving at least one F grade each term. We cannot dismiss these numbers easily. One implication here is that schools should not allow students who have poor attendance records to register for more than one difficult

course per term. The pernicious effect of "double failure" should be avoided if we want our students to stay in school.

We looked at the possible effects of the midterm warnings given to students who are doing failing class work by comparing their class absences before the warning with those after the warning. In a sample of 161 "warned" students who did fail, two out of three increased their typically high absence rate after the midterm warning. In the sample of 174 "warned" students who ultimately passed, nearly all had reduced their absence rate to near their school's average. It should also be noted that the students who passed started with generally lower absence rates at midterm than did those who failed. Nevertheless, although we would not suggest that improved attendance alone made the difference, it certainly is a frequent accompaniment to an improved grade.

Section IV. REPORT ON TEACHER DIFFERENCES (9)

A unique and major identification of the class is its teacher. Our data have continually revealed that teachers are different with respect to their students' absences. To examine these differences more thoroughly, we developed a teacher absence rating, the average student absence in all classes a teacher taught. We obtained moderately high correlations (median r = .67) between these average teacher

---

9 These and other teacher differences are examined in greater detail in de Jung and Duckworth (1986a), described in Appendix A.

ratings recomputed for the same teacher each following term within the same school year. Over 340 teachers were involved in these analyses, approximately 60 from each school. These correlations decreased only slightly for year-to-year comparisons and for comparisons of nonconsecutive terms in different school years. These decreases were expected since, apart from possible changes in teacher behaviors relevant to student attendance, both course assignments and student membership would also change during these extended intervals.

We concluded that the teacher's overall class absence rate was a relatively stable measure suggesting a primary effect of teacher upon his or her students' absences. However, the stability of the teacher's average or overall class absence rate does not tell the whole story. We also noted considerable variability among the class absence rates for different classes taught by the same teacher. We found that most teachers had at least one much better attended class or at least one much worse attended class each term. This was as true of teachers with overall lower student absence rates as of teachers with higher student absence rates. We concluded, however, that these within-teacher differences or variations did not substantially impede our classifications of teachers as low-absence or high-absence teachers.

We next considered the broad question of possible differences between teachers with lower student absence

rates and teachers with higher student absence rates. For our analysis we developed lower-, middle-, and upper third-groupings of teachers ranked (within schools) on their average class absences. These groupings of teachers were first used to identify possible differences between male and female teachers and between teachers with more students and those with fewer students. No differences were found for either variable. The percentages of male and female teachers were very similar in the high-, middle-, and low-absence groups, as were the average numbers of students taught by teachers in these three groups. Our finding that differences in the absence rate were unrelated to the teacher's sex was also supported by generally similar attendance rates (slightly favoring the male teachers) for the total sample of males and females. No evidence of differences related to sex of teacher appeared in any analysis of the project data.

The questions of possible differences between the low-absence and high-absence teacher groups was also asked for the various items on a student attendance questionnaire administered during both project years to all regular grade teachers in our six schools. This questionnaire included self-report items regarding the teachers' classroom attendance and monitoring practices and their discipline beliefs. For all items, comparisons were made between the proportions of teachers in the low-absence group and in the high-absence group choosing different item alternatives.

Though no strikingly large differences were found, a number of smaller, yet substantive, differences were noted. These included a proportionately greater number of low-absence group teachers than high-absence group teachers reporting that a high percentage of their students planned to go to a four-year college and that a high percentage of their students were interested in the subjects they teach. More low-absence group teachers also believed that more of their student absences were legitimate. An additional finding was that the majority of teachers who taught in high-absence classes also reported that most of their students were interested in the subjects the teacher taught. Apparently, student interest in the subject being taught does not, in itself, compel regular class attendance. A student's priorities may lie elsewhere.

Teacher reports of the percentages of their students absent on an average day differed, as expected, with more high-absence group teachers reporting more of their students absent. The more interesting finding here was that most teachers in the low-absence group and sizeable proportions of teachers in the middle- and high-absence groups grossly overestimated their students' absences. Differences between the three teacher groups were, however, lacking with respect to changes in absences in recent years. Approximately one fourth of the teachers in all groups reported less of these behaviors in the current year compared to past years, almost

as many reported more, and half of the teachers in all groups reported "no change." Another finding was that neither the number of years of teaching experience nor the number of years in their present school appeared at all related to the teachers' class absence rates.

Several interesting differences, however, were noted between the proportions of low-absence and high-absence teachers reporting various classroom teaching practices. Twice as many low-absence teachers reported giving daily homework assignments in their classes and more reported having a reputation as a teacher who makes heavy demands on students. More teachers from this low-absence group reported more flexibility in accommodating their slower students by modifying their scheduled class content and in regularly providing them help outside of class. However, more teachers from the high-absence group reported adapting different learning goals and grading criteria for their students.

Fewer low-absence group teachers reported lowering their students' grades because of absences. There were few differences between the three teacher absence groups, however, with respect to their more direct attendance monitoring practices. Teachers in all three groups were nearly unanimous in describing themselves as strictly enforcing attendance rules in their classes and in being concerned about accuracy in recording absences. Half the teachers in all groups reported that they regularly reported

repeated unexcused absences to school counselors. Only a fifth or less of teachers in any group reported that they regularly assigned detention or other penalties for absences or that they regularly called the homes of students with unexcused absences.

It should be noted that teacher reports of these last followup practices indicated a reduction in such practices during the two years of our data collection. These changes are likely attributable, at least in part, to improved, more centralized absence reporting and management of parent contacting in most of our project schools. In particular, two schools had newly installed computerized record keeping and two others began using automated home phoning. These improvements notwithstanding, little change was noted either in attendance reduction or amount of time teachers spent concerning their absent and tardy students. Possibly a more extended data collection period is needed to evaluate these changes. And it may be that with more administrative involvement in attendance monitoring, teachers felt persuaded or enabled to do other attendance-related tasks. In any case, an accompanying change in the second project year was an increase in teachers' reports of satisfaction with administrative support and leadership regarding their school's attendance problems. In all groups, positive reporting of their administrators increased from less than half to around two thirds. Comparisons of reports of teacher satisfactions with administrative support in the

low-absence and high-absence group, with more low-absence teachers reporting satisfaction both project years.

Differences between teachers in the low- and high-absence groups with respect to teacher reports of having "class cutting reasonably well controlled in their classes" were in the expected direction of more teachers in the low-absence group reporting "control" than in the high-absence group. The less accountable finding is that over half of the teachers whose classes had the highest absence rates in their school nonetheless reported having class cutting under control. Since their responses to other earlier questionnaire items indicated recognition and concern for the problem of class absences, their final statement of "having it reasonably under control" becomes unclear. One interpretation hinges on the word "reasonable" It could be suggested that each teacher was, in effect, reporting that he or she was doing all that could be done, that a certain baseline of class cutting was to be expected and that it could have been (or had been) worse.

Teacher response to an item concerning the history and reversibility of student absence perhaps relates here. In all groups, just over a third of the teachers agreed that truancy was beyond the teachers' ability to "reverse." On the other hand, two thirds of teachers agreed that "if all teachers would regularly enforce rules, we'd see a reduction in absences," indicating that they felt they could play a dominant role in improving attendance. A large

majority of teachers in all absence groups agreed that stronger penalties were needed to reduce class cutting and that as things stood students could get around penalties for unexcused absences. Only a small minority of teachers reported their administrators as "strict" in enforcing penalties; three times as many reported them as "lenient." Though nearly all teachers had earlier stressed the need for increased penalties in dealing with absences, nearly as large a majority also believed that it was "very important" for students to learn how to make their own decisions about obeying rules. To the extent that differences between positions advocating "student decision making" and those advocating "stronger penalties" are not reconciled, enforcement of any school policy regarding student attendance will likely fail to receive the broad teacher acceptance that it requires for effective implementation. The findings that, in both years, nearly all teachers reported class cutting and its enforcement as a problem in their school hardly describes a widely accepted or workable solution. A questionnaire item asking which of a few selected school actions would have "most payoff" in reducing absences found teachers evenly split, with as many favoring enforcing makeup time penalties as favoring automatically reduced grades or credits. With respect to this item, as with previous items regarding attendance and discipline beliefs, the responses of teachers with lower rates of

student absences barely differed from the response of teachers with higher rates of student absences.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS TO SCHOOLS

In response to requests from our participating school districts, we prepared a list of recommendations regarding attendance. We believe that our recommendations, though derived from our study of six particular high schools, have relevance for most high schools of roughly similar size and similar student populations. We suspect that reducing student absence in the much smaller rural high school may require different school responses and strategies. We know of no sustained study examining absence in the rural school. Nor do our recommendations directly address the special attendance problems accompanying ethnic and racial tensions continue to confront some of our larger city schools. None of the six schools in our study had specially traumatic problems during our two project years. Some administrators, some teachers, and many students left, and others replaced them. School continued with some peripheral changes, and absence continued as usual.

Our recommendations based on the data we have summarized in this paper, are:

1. Report high school student absences on the basis of class absences rather than full-day absences. The average class absence index used in our study is the sum of absences reported on the student's end-of-term report card for each

class in which the student was enrolled, divided by the total number of classes in which the student was enrolled. (A minor problem is that a small proportion of teachers do not enter these class absences on report cards. Missing data should be distinguishable from zero absences on all printouts.) This average number of classes missed can be "transformed" into a percentage or absence rate by dividing by the number of days on which attendance was taken. For this reason, attendance clerks should also report the number of school days on which period attendance was (and was not) taken each term. Using thr number of days of school as the divisor deflates the absence rate.

2. Continue the present "dual" recording of class absences by teachers in their class book and by the attendance clerk. The latter is used primarily for state and district-level attendance reporting and for quick recall data for attendance reviews. Both recording practices should be maintained. The savings in time is really minor (typically, the time it takes to make three or four checks onto a class list per period), since attendance is taken only once. But lists do occasionally get lost, and errors or omissions do occur in entering and compiling data. Requiring each teacher to maintain and keep a class book record not only emphasizes the importance of attendance data and each teacher's responsibility for accurate attendance data but also provides a permanently available absence account as part of a fuller record of student compliance.

3. The usefulness (and costs) of maintaining distinctions between excused and unexcused absences needs to be examined. In all six schools studied a common complaint was that the routine (forced?) acceptance by teachers and school attendance officers of practically all parentally supported reasons for absences diminished the enforcement credibility and authority of the school. In responding to our questionnaires, most teachers estimated that over half of their student's absences were not legitimate. Some forging does occur (a spot telephone survey in one school identified three percent of excuses as forgeries), but probably the bulk of legitimizing unexcusable absences occurs when parents "cover" for a son or daughter.

In any event, absence from class, excused or not, means missing that class period. This applies to field trips and other special events that affect only some students. All class absences should be counted as such in the record of class attendance.

4. Penalties for unexcused class or school absences appear to have limited effect in reducing absences though it is difficult to know since controlled studies are lacking. Different penalties would probably "work" with different students but, again, data are lacking. What we do know from the questionnaire data is that the primary reason students give for cutting class is that the class is "dull." The primary reason they give for not cutting is that they would miss a significant amoung to work and would have to make it

up. Parental knowledge of their absence is a second reason, particularly for freshmen. Penalties such as detention were selected as a prime reason for not cutting class by less than 6 percent of students. Part of this downplay of penalties as a deterent is probably due to the inconsistency of teacher enforcement reported by the majority of students and their teachers, even though the teachers pointed to "other" teachers as the inconsistent rule enforcers.

Our questionnaire surveys and interviews reveal a predominant feeling of both teachers and students alike that stricter penalties and more consistent enforcement would reduce student absences. We support the latter emphasis and recommend schools close "loopholes" and exceptions and work toward more unified implementation of their attendance rules. We remain ambivalent about effects of increased penalties and urge schools to develop their own answers as to what works for particular subpopulations by conducting minitrials and collecting effectiveness data. Only in this way will they get beyond opinion and obtain knowledge about what works at what cost.

5. In all six schools the relationship between absences and grades was especially striking and admists to relatively few individual exceptions. Students with the fewest absences clearly have the highest grade averages. Furthermore, high-absence students receive nearly all the low GPAs and very few low-absence students have GPSs below 1.5.

The class absences of students in classes where they received F grades were from two to three times as frequent as were absences for the total school populations of which they were part. However, class absences in their failed classes are much lower for students who fail only one class than they are when those students fail more than one class. This suggests that a student who fails only one of his or her classes is more likely to continue to attend that class (and perhaps to continue to try to earn a passing grade), whereas students who fail in several classes will tend to quit coming to all these classes. Since the prospect of multiple failures appears to have an especially pernicious affect on class attendance, students who are academically weak and who have a history of absences should not be programmed into more than one "difficult" course at a time without considering the "attendance risk."

6. The relationship between continued poor attendance and non-graduation needs to be better advertised. Most of our chronically absent students said that they expected to graduate. Probably their parents also believed this. The much more likely outcome is that they would leave school, early or late, without a diploma. School district actuarial tables relating absence to nongraduation could perhaps make this more convincing.

7. According to student self-report, most class cutting appears to be spontaneous: it is not planned the prior day. Nor are these solitary behaviors; students usually cut class

or skip school without friends. Reducing the opportunities for preplanning by reducing "empty" periods in the students' programs and by scheduling courses with known higher absence rates earlier in the school day is to be recommended. Restricting access to popular student congregating places, such as smoking areas or across-the-street-parks, should also be considered.

8. Analyses of repeated terms of class absence data indicates that particular teachers and particular courses can be identified as consistently associated with higher class absence rates. These high absence classes should not be ignored or tacitly tolerated. They are more than a teacher problem or department problem. Though they require class level analyses and selection of attendance improvement strategems uniquely appropriate for that class, they are nonetheless a school problem.

Conclusion--A Personal View

In the final analysis, to attend or not attend a class is a student's personal decision. The student needs to believe that attendance is his or her best, most rewarding alternative. Absenteeism is too frequently accepted as a side effect of compulsory schooling; and as part of the much larger, less tractable problems of the school's image as an authoritarian adversary, as the "natural" expression of rebellious and developing youth. But all absence statistics are based on individual decisions. Given that the negative

consequences of continued irregular attendance can be shown, given that neither students nor parents are prepared to commit themselves to a pattern that inevitably leads to failure and nongraduation, and given that school staff (teachers, counselors, and administrators) can provide encouragement and personalized concern and strategies, change--improved school attendance--should be an ordinary expectation.

REFERENCES

Alexander, K. L., and Pallas, A.M. (1984). Curriculum reform and school performance: An evaluation of the "New Basics." American Journal of Education, 92, 391-420.

Barr, R. B. (1985). "The 1982-83 School Leaver Study of San Diego Unified School District." Mimeographed. San Diego, CA: Research Department, Planning, Research, and Evaluation Division, San Diego City Schools.

Birman, B., and Natriello, G. (1978). "Perspectives on Absenteeism in High Schools." Journal of Research and Development in Education 2, 29-38.

Duke, D. (1978). How administrators view the crisis in school discipline. Phi Delta Kappan. 59(5),325-330.

deJung, J. and Duckworth, K. (1984). "Student Discipline Policy in Middle Schools." Final Report. Eugene, Ore.: Center for Educational Policy and Management, University of Oregon.

Fiske, E. (1983, January 9). "A Third of High School Students Chronically Absent in New York: New York Times.

Foster, S. G. (1983, February 9). "Absenteeism is School Officials' Major Problem." Education Week.

Howe, H. (1984). Giving equity a chance in the excellence game. Martin Buskin memo lecture. Washington, DC: Education Writers' Association.

Kaplan, J. L., and Luck, C. (1977). "The Dropout Phenomenon as a Social Problem." The Educational Forum, 47, 41-56.

McDill, E. L.; Natriello, G.; and Pallas, A. M. (1985, Winter). Raising Standards and Retaining Students: The Impact of Reform Recommendations on Potential Dropouts. Review of Educational Research, 55, 415-433.

Meyer, J., Chase-Dunn, C., and Inverarity, J. (1971). The expansion of the autonomy of Responses of the secondary school to the problems of order in the 1960s. Stanford Laboratory for Social Research, Stanford University.

NAASP. (1975). "Student Attendance and Absenteeism." The Practitioner, 1, 1-2.

Natriello, G., and Dornbusch, S. M. (1984). Teacher Evaluative Standards and Student Effort. New York: Longman.

Schellenberg, J. (1985). "Patterns of Graduation and Dropping Out in the Class of '84, District 4J." Eugene, OR: Eugene Public Schools.

Wheatley, W. J. et al. (1974, September 23). Wheatley vs. Board of Education of Burlington, New Jersey. Commissioner of Education Division.

APPENDIX A

Project Reports

Available through the Center for Policy Management, College of Education, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403

deJung, J. and Duckworth, K. (1986a) "High School Teachers and their Students' Attendance". Different classes sometimes have very different rates of class absence. This paper examines why. It looks at possible effects of class size, time of day, subject area, grading practices, and student ability. It also examines the effects of teacher classroom practices, attendance monitoring, and attitudes regarding absenteeism.

deJung, J. and Duckworth, K. (1986b) "Absences From Class: A Two Year Study of Student NonAttendance in the High School." Class absences, school achievement, and various self reported behaviors and attitudes of 8,000 students are examined. Differences and similarities between frequently absent and infrequently absent students are reported. The relationship between classroom absences, failing grades and early school leaving is further examined. (This paper is to be completed June 1986).

Duckworth, K., and deJung, J. (1986a) "High School Procedures for Managing Student Absenteeism: Staff Implementation and Satisfaction and Student Response." This paper presents descriptive information about the policies and procedures used to manage absenteeism in six high schools, devoting considerable space to describing school response to absenteeism and identifying variations in procedures that may relate to variations in staff implementation and satisfaction, and school rates of student absenteeism.

Duckworth, K., and deJung, J. (1986b) "Variations in Student Skipping: A Study of Six High Schools." Using student questionnaire data, the authors build a model of influences on individual students' rates of skipping. The research tests expanations for skipping derived from theories of social control and educational motivation.